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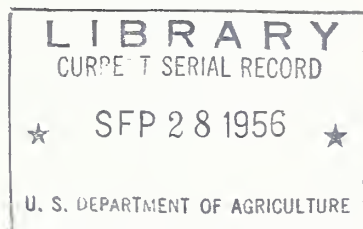
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The

AGRICULTURAL

COLONY

OF TUREN



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THE AGRICULTURAL COLONY OF TUREN

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Considerable interest has been exhibited of late by farmers in the colonization efforts of the Latin American countries. Numerous requests for information concerning colonies and the prospects for a U.S. farmer becoming a parcelero (landowner) there have been received by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. We wish to point out that the development of most of these colonies has been directed toward the settlement of Europeans and that any U.S. citizen interested in settling in the colonies should first consider carefully all of the factors involved before making any definite plans to go there. In most cases, as in the Colony of Turen in Venezuela, bumper crop yields are not obtained and farming there is not an easy way to get rich. The Turen Colony has been chosen for this article because it appears to be commanding the most recent and widespread interest of the people in this country.

The agricultural colony of Turen is located about 6 miles southwest of the little town of Turen, in the central part of the State of Portuguesa in Venezuela. The State of Portuguesa has an area of about 3,756,300 acres. Here the National Agrarian Institute (a government organization) has about 50,000 acres of land in the District of Turen for colonization purposes. The Venezuelan Government started its colonization efforts here in 1949, but was not in a position to give title to this land until just recently because it belonged as ejidal (common or public) lands to the town of Turen.

BACKGROUND

The land being used for the Turen colony is relatively level and was originally heavily forested. It has been occupied by several hundred farmers, called conquerors, who practice what is known in Mexico and Central America as "milpa" farming. This consists of clearing (burning) the forest, cropping the burned area for 3 or 4 years, then abandoning it. This practice, though using land inefficiently, is not a harmful form of agriculture, especially in erosion-free flat lands. It is the opinion of many soils men in Venezuela that these conucos (farms) decline in yield from the destruction of organic matter. The basic soils are devoid of humus and the few years' farming is based upon the relatively thin upper layer of humus and litter laid down under tropical forest conditions. This is never very great. It is reasoned that once the forest is removed and the tropical sun gets full chance, humus rapidly

disappears. This point is important as it bears directly on the character of the agriculture that must be adopted and suggests a short-lived prosperity for the Turen Colony unless a system is devised for maintaining or improving the soils. The region is replete with examples (not all conucos) where this problem is paramount.

On the whole, the soils of the region are light, possibly classifiable as sandy loams. This is an alluvial deposit placed over a lateritic clay typical of large areas of the llanos (plains). The sandy loam deposit is in some places 50 feet or more in depth. There are, of course, a few areas, irregular in size and shape, of heavy clay soils, but in most cases soil fertility is such that commercial fertilizers are required.

Clearing the Land

Forest clearing is being done in Turen under contract, using the latest and heaviest equipment. This contract calls for clearing the land by mechanization for \$73 per acre, with the National Agrarian Institute furnishing all the machinery and footing the bills for all repairs over \$300. With new machinery working in the partially cleared area, repair costs have been low, but this favorable condition will not hold as the machinery becomes worn and virgin jungle is tackled. In the immediate neighborhood, large operators find clearing costs often exceed \$125 per acre. Every effort, however, is being made to hold total cost of the farm land down to not more than \$245 per acre, as the National Agrarian Institute believes that if the farm cost exceeds that sum the farmer cannot pay for it.

Once an energetic and intelligent farmer has been given land ownership it is thought he should be able to prosper, at least on the better lands, provided his acre cost is not too high. The ceiling set at \$245 per acre is not excessive for irrigated land, but it looms large for rainfall farming in a country with almost 6 rainless months. Rainfall averages about 65 inches annually and falls between April and November. The rest of the year is hot and dry. There is also the mechanization cost. In any event, with the light soils and their need for organic matter, it would appear that most of these farms should raise feed and livestock.

Plan of the Colony

The Turen project is divided into three administrative and technical areas. The farmers belonging to the Colony are carefully selected by the Venezuelans and must not have more than Bs. 6,000 (\$1,800) to be eligible. Each farmer is given a rotation which he must follow. The principal crops are corn, beans, sesame, rice, and cotton, in that order. The usual system is corn during the wet season from April to September, and beans from October to January.

Technical advice is given the farmer and necessary materials and equipment are provided for dusting, etc. The parcelero is obliged to start payments on the machinery with his first receipts and has a 5-year period to discharge this obligation. He is given 25 years to pay for his land, but these payments do not begin until he has worked his place 2 years, the probationary period.

The farmer lives on his land and the houses are arranged in groups of four. Each house is provided with electricity and with water piped from a central system. The general idea is to have four nationalities represented in each group of four homes in order to minimize building up national cliques, and to speed adaption and exchange of ideas and skills. The Colony is also provided with an excellent grocery store, furniture shop, machine shop, 4-bed hospital, club house, and 6-room schoolhouse, and is being provided with a church and a new 20-room hospital.

In 1952, about half the parceleros had chickens and a few had pigs; fewer still had cows. Also in 1952, there were about 270 families located in Turen. Most of them were growing only one crop, although 68 had been on the project long enough to raise three crops. By late 1953, there were 586 parcels in cultivation, with a total area of 35,000 acres.

Beginning in 1954, the Venezuelan Ministry of Agriculture announced that, in agreement with the National Agrarian Institute, the farming system followed up to that time at Turen would be changed. Through 1953, the system used was largely corn, rice, and beans, with a few farmers owning a cow or two and some chickens. The main crops were sold for cash. Since 1954 each farmer has been supplied with construction materials to build a dairy barn for 4 cows. He must build a pig pen for 6 pigs from local materials that can be obtained from the forests that surround Turen. In addition, the farmer must build a chicken house for 200 chickens. His farm plan is to be oriented toward producing the feed for this livestock. The 4 cows are expected to yield the family enough milk daily for home use. It is expected that at least some of the hogs, as well as eggs and baby chicks, will be marketed for cash.

The largest parcels of land at Turen are approximately 75 acres. The government has made it obligatory for the settlers to live on their 75 acres and not work elsewhere, although they may lease additional land. It is interesting to observe that many of the colonists are now seeking additional acres outside the colony but close enough to make it possible to farm the "home place." These colonists recognize that 75 acres are not enough to give them full use of their investment in agricultural machinery nor full-time employment for themselves. But evidently the 75 acres they have secured, under favorable financing by the government, are enough to give the farmers sufficient margin over subsistence to enable them to expand. As a result of this demand for additional acreage, land values around Turen are climbing. Properties that a little over 3 years ago changed hands at \$65 to \$75 an acre are now offered at more than \$300 per acre.

OUTLOOK

Although the farms in the Turen development have been larger than those of other colonies developed in the past, the cost has been great. Recently, colonies of the Agrarian Institute have gone back to the old 10-acre basis, in preference to the 75-acre plots. These small areas do not permit the accumulation of working capital, as the 75-acre plots appear to have done, but remain subsistence units.

Just what the future holds with regard to ultimate farm size for the colonists at Turen is hazardous to predict at this time. Land values there are climbing faster than is justified by yield. Non-colonist farmers in the same general area, however, have been able to finance holdings of 500 acres.

